

# Rural occupational therapists: We don't know where they are but they sure are busy!

## Introduction

Occupational therapists help people do things. We work with people who need skills, changes to the environment around them, or new ways to do the things that are important to them, particularly people with disabilities. We help with basic but essential tasks like using the toilet and having a shower, through to complex activities like writing, socialising, or getting about using a wheelchair.

Demand for occupational therapists across Australia was high before the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, and recommended changes to the mental health system, but since then, the demand for occupational therapy services has surged and there is a shortage across all of Australia (National Skills Commission, 2022).

But rural people seem to be having the most difficulty accessing services. While 28% of Australia lives outside urban spaces, less than 22% of occupational therapists are found in these spaces (Dept. of Health, 2022).

This maldistribution is concerning, however, it is unclear if there is a significant difference in availability of therapists per person with disabilities.

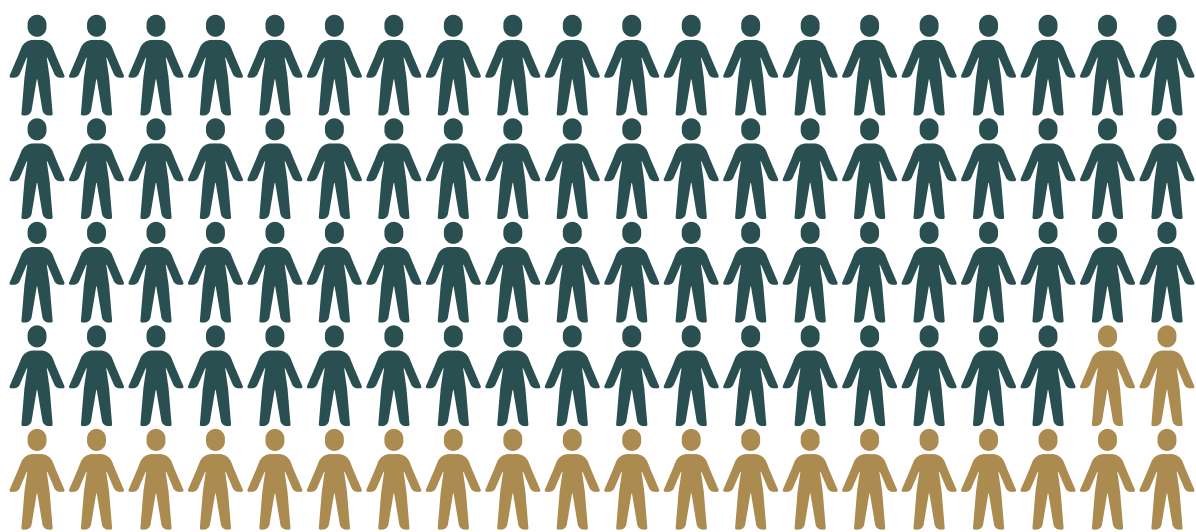
## Objectives:

- Identify the distribution of occupational therapists between rural and urban areas of Australia (Dept. Health, 2021).
- Compare Australian occupational therapy workforce distribution between rural and urban areas with likely needs

## Method

- Department of Health (2021) occupational therapy workforce data was graphed against the 5 Australian Statistical Geography Standard - Remoteness Areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).
- The resultant workforce distribution data was compared against the population in each remoteness area from the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data (2016).
- The workforce data was also compared against the Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of people with a disability (2018)
- The severity of impairment between people living in each remoteness area was compared.

## 78% of Australia's occupational therapists live in cities



## Total population/therapist increases with remoteness



## Twice as many disabled people/therapist in rural places



## References:

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) - Volume 5 - Remoteness Structure <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1270.0.55.005>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2019). Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#data-download>

Department of Health (2021). National Health Workforce Dataset. <https://hwd.health.gov.au/resources/information/nhwds.html>

National Skills Commission. (2022). Skills Priority List. <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/skills-priority-list>

## Where to from here?

While the access disparity is obvious, it is unclear exactly where in Australia these therapists are located. Potentially there are remote areas which are well serviced and regional which are not.

Further research is required to understand the spatial distribution of therapists and the services available in comparison to population needs.

**Karen Hayes**

Lecturer Charles Sturt University

PhD Student Western Sydney University

